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ABSTRACT

A middle-grade restructuring effort implemented by the Monterey Peninsula Unified School District is described in this report. A literature review and interviews with four educators experienced in restructuring explore issues in middle-school transition at the school and district levels. Topics related to the implementation process include needs assessment, the school/State Board of Education relationship, cooperative planning, planning team formation, and the leadership role. The following specific issues are briefly discussed: individual and district reorganization; teacher assignment; curriculum development; orientation; school climate improvement; implementation and evaluation; and scheduling. A list of resources is provided. (12 references) (LMI)

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California League of Middle Schools

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Practitioner's Monograph #10:

MAKING THE TRANSITION

TO

MIDDLE LEVEL SCHOOLS

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by

Sara Lake

April, 1990

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The California League of Middle Schools is an association of people who are interested in furthering the growth and development of middle schools and middle school concepts. The League is composed of parents, teachers, school and district administrators, State Department of Education officials, and others who have an interest in the education of early adolescents.

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Junior high schools are rapidly becoming middle level schools. The change makes sense in the context of today's movement to reform and restructure public education. It is being urged both at the state level, with California's task force report, *Caught in the Middle*, and nationally, with the 1989 Carnegie report, *Turning Points*.

Change is never easy. Be it a single school adopting the middle level philosophy or a district-wide grade restructuring, there are many complex factors to consider. Logistics alone can be a sufficient headache: assigning space, revising curriculum, rearranging schedules, moving books and materials. But the most delicate task involves moving people--not physically but mentally--so that they buy in to the vision of middle level schooling. If they do not, adoption of this model has little chance for success.

To better grasp the "people" issues involved in the middle level transition, this monograph draws not only on the published literature, but on the experiences of four "veterans" of transitions that began as far back as 1978. They shared their insights on the change process during interviews conducted in January, 1990. They are:

Marc Ecker, Principal of Talbert Middle School (Fountain Valley Elementary School District), Huntington Beach, CA

Jeanette Phillips, Principal of Tenaya Middle School (Fresno Unified School District), Fresno, CA

Bill Tibbey, Associate Superintendent of Secondary Education for Monterey Peninsula Unified School District, Monterey, CA

Bob Welch, Principal of Burlingame Intermediate School (Burlingame Elementary School District), Burlingame, CA

Between them, these four educators have a great deal of experience both with changing individual schools and with restructuring entire districts to include middle level schools. At first glance these would seem to be very different tasks, but the difference appears to be more one of scale than substance. All four educators recommend a common planning process for both tasks.

THE IMPETUS FOR CHANGE

More and more school leaders are being drawn to the middle level philosophy by the values and success of the idea itself (Alexander, p.9). Middle level education specifically addresses the academic and personal needs of its students. The power of this model to benefit students has been sufficient to encourage its widespread adoption.

But there is no denying that other forces play a part in school reorganization decisions. So extensive a change, particularly when it involves restructuring grade levels across district schools, frequently stems from the recognition of some severe district problem(s): declining enrollment (with impending school closure), racial imbalance, overcrowding, or discipline failings.

The existence of such problems may help spread awareness of the need for change and encourage the commitment of time and money to making change work. But severe district problems may also generate a "crisis mentality," in which problem solving is rushed and solutions not carefully thought out. Like any major

innovation, the implementation of middle level education requires comprehensive, broad-based planning, that begins by setting the stage for change.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Both Bill Tibbey and Bob Welch emphasize that a spirit of trust and cooperation must exist throughout the district--or be created--before change can even be considered. The Board, administration, faculty, staff, parents, and community must all share a perception that their schools are good institutions and that proposed changes are intended to benefit students, not to satisfy someone's hidden agenda. If trust does not exist, it is all too likely that motivations will be questioned and cooperation withheld.

The level of trust and cooperation is sometimes affected by individuals. For example, a leader new to the district might find it better to spend one or two years building trust before beginning a major change. The departure of a leader or several key persons may slow the momentum of an innovation.

Lasting change occurs when there is a "critical mass" of opinion in favor of it (Fox, pp.10-12). School leaders can lay the groundwork for change by (1) building a knowledge base and (2) involving all concerned in an objective analysis of problems and needs.

Most of today's parents, teachers, and board members probably attended traditional junior high schools. Whether or not the memory is a fond one, they are likely to feel that junior

high school practices are "normal"--"the way things are done." The middle level philosophy contains many components (e.g., cooperation as well as competition, active learning as well as seatwork, teachers who are facilitators and advisors as well as lecturers) that may seem odd, frivolous, even threatening at first glance. Several ideas may suffer guilt-by-association with the more spectacular innovation "flops" of the 1960s, such as team teaching and flexible modular scheduling (Wiles and Bondi, p.40). If parents and staff are to see any value in these new ways, they will need to learn about and discuss them.

There are numerous books, pamphlets, and films available on adolescent development and on middle level education. Faculty, PTA, and community meetings all provide forums for discussion. Guest speakers may be brought in. Networking with successful middle level schools provides visitation sites where skeptics can see that these ideas really do work.

But staff and community need more than an abstract knowledge of adolescent development and the middle level plan; they need to understand their own school (or district) and weigh what middle level education has to offer their particular students. Bill Tibbey and Bob Welch warn against presenting middle level education as a pat answer--another of education's quick fixes. Instead, opinion must spread that this is a productive response to specific local needs.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

To develop this opinion, administrators should lead an inclusive and honest analysis of district problems and needs. The middle level model can be studied as one of several potential options. (In the case of declining enrollment, other options might include different grade organizations; in the case of overcrowded elementary schools, year-round schools might be studied as an alternative.) The transition to middle level education should be implemented when consensus decrees it to be the best alternative.

The Board of Education may appoint a task force or a leadership team to do the analysis and make recommendations. Various assessment methods are available: force field analysis or another formal problem solving strategy; surveys; town meetings; brainstorming teams of parents, students, faculty, and community members.

In the Monterey Peninsula Unified School District, a task force first detailed a desired set of outcomes for change. It then used these outcomes to compare several alternate plans, selecting the best one for implementation.

Data on existing conditions in the district will need to be reviewed. Most schools in California have a recent Program Quality Review self-study; in considering the middle level option they may wish to compare this to *Caught in the Middle* and the state Middle Grade Quality Criteria. Data on facilities, student characteristics, staff qualifications, and community resources must be gathered and collated.

Some districts may choose to hire a consultant to manage a particularly complex assessment and/or to provide "objective" leadership, so that there is no community perception that the analysis is being steered by a hidden agenda.

GAINING BOARD COMMITMENT

When the needs assessment is complete and all parties have been heard, the study team can make a recommendation to the Board of Education. Presumably, for the purposes of this monograph, that recommendation will be to adopt middle level education.

Ideally, the Board will also have been learning about middle level education and will have been informed of the planning process to date. Jeanette Phillips suggests including one or two Board members on the study team to insure Board awareness and commitment. Before the transition process can begin, the Board must be committed both to middle level education and to the need for a comprehensive, long-term, community-based planning process. Experienced educators affirm that careful planning is essential to a successful transition.

A school/community planning team or steering committee is an effective vehicle for community-based planning. The relationship between the Board and a steering committee should be considered in advance. James Fox points out that such a committee can be extremely powerful. On occasion it may run ahead of the Board. It must be made clear that the Board is the governing body with whom final decisions rest (pp.8-9).

A COOPERATIVE PLANNING PROCESS FOR TRANSITION

Veterans of the middle school transition process agree that full local involvement in planning is vital. Because quality middle level education is, by its very nature, responsive to particular student needs and dependent on the efforts of committed educators and parents, it cannot be created simply by imposing an abstract model on a community. James and Boyles make this point: "a local model is the only viable solution. Other authorities, other schools, other personnel can influence the final choices, but local conditions, energies, and manpower ultimately combine to establish a unique response to needs" (p.15). *Caught in the Middle* makes the same assertion:

> Renewal and reform in the middle grades means that every community...must be willing to put its own imprint on new principles of middle grade education. The large urban districts will do this in a different way than will the smaller districts of the rural north. The medium-sized districts will each have their own unique response. It should not be otherwise. The most significant factor about any major change is that it must be able to be accommodated to the unique interests, ideals, and values of local communities without losing its essential qualities--its integrity. This is the challenge of middle grade educational reform in California (CSDE, p.136).

Even within a district, local adaptations can be developed at various schools. When Fresno USD created 10 middle schools out of 13 junior high schools in 1978, personnel at each school developed a unique school site plan, ranging from the very innovative to the traditional (Phillips, p.4).

Bill Tibbey reports that one of the strongest features of Monterey's transition plan was the development of 40 middle level education criteria. Both before and after the decision was made

to develop middle level schools, the district planning team visited every school, held public meetings in every town, and talked to certificated and classified staff, as well as parents. The team then devised criteria based not just on the philosophical model but on what residents said they wanted Monterey's middle level schools to be. The resulting criteria were formally adopted by the Board, and they remain the yardstick against which the district's middle level schools are measured. Tibbey feels that these criteria--and the district's commitment to adhere to them--have given Monterey's middle level schools integrity and credibility with the community.

When speaking of planning, veterans of this process tend to agree on the following advice: be sure you involve everyone right from the start, but be *particularly* sure that you involve the teachers' association. On your side, the association can be invaluable, not only in dealing with staffing concerns, but in facilitating curriculum and program development.

THE PLANNING TEAM AND THE PLANNING PROCESS

The actual size and composition of the planning team will vary according to school or district needs. Some districts use special subcommittees or *ad hoc* groups on special issues, such as instructional programs, students, staff, facilities, and communications (Bentley and Campbell, p.9). Monterey added a core task force of four administrators to handle the extremely complex coordination issues involved in reorganizing grades across a large, K-12 school district. It also appointed teams of subject

specialist teachers and building principals to develop and articulate the new curriculum (Tibbey, p.2).

Actual planning activities also vary according to district need. A 1988 survey found that the majority of schools used school visitations and a year or more of faculty planning. Most also engaged the prospective staff of the new schools in planning and inservice (Alexander, p.10).

Clark and Clark suggest an eight-step planning and implementation process:

1) Clarify (Where are we now? Where do we want to be?).
2) Assess needs.
3) Develop school philosophy and goals (based on identified local needs).
4) Learn about middle level programs (through reading, visitation, conference attendance, etc.).
5) Set program goals and/or objectives.
6) Develop operational objectives out of these program goals.
7) Sequence the operational objectives into a logical, highly-specific, year-by-year plan.
8) Write annual activity lists based on this plan (pp.43-51).

LEADERSHIP ROLE

The first role leaders play will be to bring middle level education to the attention of staff and parents. They can start by networking with exemplary middle level schools and encouraging others to do the same, by starting discussions, and by providing literature and guest speakers (Marsh, p16). The process should

begin in an "informal, casual, and comfortable" way, but with a definite intent "that brings this generalized discussion to a meaningful head" (Fox, p.7).

As the discussion and planning processes deepen, it is important that practical facts as well as philosophical points are widely disseminated. For example, school site planners, parents, and the community are sure to be very concerned about such issues as racial balance, costs, and/or the fate of particular schools (Tibbey, p.3). Leaders need to have and share such information openly.

Throughout the entire planning and implementation process, open communications need to be emphasized within schools, as well as with parents and the community.

As implementation moves along, school leaders must provide not only encouragement, but practical resource support. Gayle Dorman, who studied implementation in eleven different schools, lauded principals who were creative in managing resources: "They juggle time, energy, talent, and money to maintain daily school operations while planning and implementing school improvements ....[They are] entrepreneurs in the best sense of the word" (p.100). A study of California schools that were implementing recommendations from *Caught in the Middle* found that principals had success in using the School Improvement Program (SIP) to consolidate plans, fund staff training, develop lead teachers, and pay for release time and new resources (Marsh, pp.16-17).

School leaders have an important role to play in sustaining the improvement process. While the use of careful, consensus-

based planning should provide a good start, energy for change naturally tends to ebb and flow. Fox calls it the "February Syndrome," when exhaustion from the hard work of change first catches up with people. He counsels leaders to be sensitive to mood and not to let negativism creep in. Instead, this is the time for staff appreciation activities, a time to "ease back and let your staff taste some of the fruits of their labor" (p.13).

Bob Welch also notes that sweeping organizational change is sure to create problems and incite opposition. Leaders must avoid the temptation to pull back when obstacles are encountered.

SPECIFIC ISSUES

DISTRICT-WIDE VERSUS SINGLE SCHOOL PLANNING: A single school--whatever its grade structure--may decide on philosophic grounds to adopt middle level practices. This will obviously entail fewer logistical problems than a district conducting a full-scale grade restructuring.

Any change requires Board approval and careful articulation with elementary and high schools, but moving grade levels between schools requires detailed work by everyone in the district.

The 6-8 grade organization is now the most popular model for middle level schools and the one advocated in *Caught in the Middle*, but only careful analysis of facilities and enrollment will determine if that model is right for a particular district. The 6-8 structure is likely to be a good choice for a district in which declining enrollment has made the 7-8 schools too small to offer a viable program. But in another district, adding a sixth

grade may make the middle level school too large. Jeanette Phillips reports that this was the case in the Fresno Unified School District, which has, since 1978, conducted a widely-recognized middle level education program in schools consisting of grades 7 and 8.

Moving grade 9 into a high school means that the high school must undergo the same organizational challenges as the new middle level school: program redesign, policy review, teacher training, student orientation. This adds greatly to the logistical complexities: moving textbooks, reassigning space to special programs, weeding and reorganizing school library/media centers. To ease these complexities, Bob Welch points out that, if facilities permit, it may not be necessary to move both the sixth and the ninth grade in the same year.

TEACHER ASSIGNMENT: In an ideal world, a middle level school would start with a full staff of volunteer teachers, all with middle level credentials. In the real world of California schools, there is no middle level credential, and teacher reassignment has to be negotiated with the teachers' association. Jeanette Phillips and Bill Tibbey suggest basing assignments first on teachers who volunteer, then filling in by seniority. With luck (and perhaps some encouragement) the new middle level school may acquire a staff of teachers roughly balanced between elementary and secondary credentials.

It can be pointed out to teachers that the reorganization offers a tremendous chance for growth and challenge for those willing to take it. James Fox found in his Florida schools, "a

new spirit following reorganization. The district has a group of teachers renewed, trying something different, challenged in a different way, and enthusiastic about what they are attempting often to a degree that they have not experienced since first entering the profession" (p.2).

STAFF DEVELOPMENT: The middle level model places many new demands on teachers, so staff development is crucial to any transition plan. Fortunately, says Fox, school boards are usually supportive of increased staff development during a reorganization (p.5).

The prospective staff of the new middle level school needs meaningful training. One district pulled all staff members away from their classes for three weeks of training during the spring preceding the opening of new middle schools. Jeanette Phillips comments that this particular tactic is not without its drawbacks. It represented a strong signal of support by the district administration, and the majority of teachers really appreciated it; but some teachers resented being pulled away from their classrooms for so long.

Wiles and Bondi point out another pitfall of planning that can directly impact teachers' acceptance of and enthusiasm for the new school:

> An error commonly made in middle school program development is to leave the "design" hanging in the form of generalities. If, for instance, middle schools are to assist learners in the transition from elementary to high schools, how is this to be done? Teachers cannot be asked to infer what such generalities mean...(p.20).

Careful initial training will pay off as implementation

progresses over the years, because it will help the district develop a cadre of successful, experienced teachers and principals who can lead further staff development (Marsh, p.16).

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT: Movement of grade levels demands district-wide curriculum articulation, presenting an opportunity for reassessment and renewal. Alexander and George suggest that, because individual schools already have so much to do in the transition process, articulation is likely to fall to the district leadership, which will need to arrange representative planning and implementation teams (p.42).

ORIENTATION: Students and parents will need to learn about the new plan through meetings, newsletters, visits back and forth, and, perhaps, from counselors (if available) visiting all feeder elementary schools. Both students and parents will need to know that the middle level philosophy places more demands on students to be active participants in learning.

In a transition from a 7-9 to a 6-8 grade structure, parents of potential sixth graders (and perhaps ninth graders) are often anxious about their children being placed with older students in more mature situations. (For example, anxiety about sixth graders showering and changing for physical education is fairly common.) Parental concerns must be heeded, and plans made to address them.

Bob Welch reminds us that *all* students need orientation to the new grade structure. When a sixth grade is added to a middle school, these children will be the focus of special attention. But it is important to remember that the seventh grade class that year has also just arrived at the school. If the ninth grade is

leaving, eighth graders must be prepared for their new role as "senior class" school leaders.

SELECTING WHICH MIDDLE SCHOOL PRACTICES TO IMPLEMENT FIRST: It is probably physically, emotionally, and financially impossible to simultaneously implement all the features of middle level education (e.g., interdisciplinary teaming, integrated curriculum, cooperative and active learning, a teacher advisor program). The burden on the teaching staff would simply be too great. Once the new school faculty is selected, it should have a voice in the order and sequence of change.

Two recent transition studies (Marsh, p.15; Dorman, p.94) found that most schools began by working to improve school climate: creating a safe, supportive environment; developing a positive discipline plan; implementing rewards and recognition programs for student and staff; and improving school spirit. Aside from the obvious benefit of making the school a nicer place to be, starting with school climate has a number of advantages:

- It accomplishes a great deal fairly quickly and inexpensively. Some staff development, planning time, and program cost are entailed, but nothing so expensive or onerous as a major organizational shift like interdisciplinary teaming.
- In creating a better emotional tone, it gives everyone a positive first experience with change.
- It establishes "a process and direction for further school improvement and [creates] a "can do" attitude among staff" (Dorman, p.94).

- In Bob Welch's words, it "gets the school in shape," helping the community see the school as positive and worthwhile. Parents who are anxious about sending their sixth graders to mingle with older children will surely balk if the receiving school has a bad climate or reputation.

Moving on from climate to actual organizational changes, schools have successfully started with block scheduling/core curriculum or with interdisciplinary teaming. Jeanette Phillips even reports that one school is starting now with the teacher advisor component. This may be somewhat surprising, because teacher advisor programs are a frequent focus of teacher concern: they are perceived by many teachers as an extra class preparation and an uncomfortable new role.

To smooth the way into this new role, Marc Ecker reports using a gradual four-step plan that allows teachers time to "buy in" to the advisory process: first, determine where advisement will fit in the school schedule; second, select an advisory curriculum; third, provide inservice that directly addresses teachers' concerns; and fourth, start with a pilot project. According to Jeanette Phillips, the second step--providing a curriculum--is particularly important to the success of a teacher advisor program. Teachers don't have the time to develop their own lessons; they need to have curriculum materials supplied by the district.

If transition is carefully planned and conducted with comprehensive and honest involvement, educators will find that they have *already* implemented some important features of middle

level education. Strong parent-school communication, the empowerment of school site personnel to reflect on and improve teaching, a consensus vision, and the willingness to work together for change: all these will be developed by a cooperative planning process and should remain key components of middle level schooling.

IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION: Progress must be monitored throughout the years of implementation. Sarasota, Florida, conducted a four-month audit half way through its five-year implementation plan (Fox, p.15). Monterey had its original Planning Team continue for a year in order to measure progress against its 40 criteria for middle level schools. It also conducted an extensive parent survey (Tibbey, p.2).

TIMELINES: Today, schools are taking more time in preliminary planning (Alexander, p.9). "Three to five years" is often suggested for the planning and implementation process, but a district's actual timeline will, of course, be a function of starting points and local needs. (For example, a district with severe K-6 overcrowding may not be able to wait that long.) But most planners agree that, whatever time span is chosen, the implementation plan must have a very detailed long-range calendar that sequences and coordinates the process.

Perhaps it is best not to look for too definite a timeline, because setting a timeline implies that implementation will end. Bob Welch points out that a good middle level school is never really "finished"; it always remains dynamic and improving. Transition is forever.

RESOURCES

Veterans agree that networking, visitation, and sharing are essential. These three organizations can provide strong linkages:

California League of Middle Schools
2401 L Street
Sacramento, CA 95816
(916) 447-7838

National Middle School Association
4807 Evanswood Drive
Columbus, OH 43229
(614) 848-8211

Thaddeus Dumas
Office of Middle Grade Support Services
California State Department of Education
P.O. Box 944272
Sacramento, CA 94244
(916) 324-0087

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